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ABSTRACT

Intense sibling loyalty was examined in three sibling groups: (1) four brothers in mid-life, aged 36-45, three of whom were married; (2) two brothers, aged 20 and 22, attending the same university; and (3) a brother age 6 and his sister age 9 living together in a foster home. Anecdotal excerpts from extensive videotaped interviews are used to illustrate what sibling solidarity is and how it is demonstrated, to show how such strong attachments are formed, and to identify the benefits and burdens of such loyalty. (JMB)

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A Study of Extremely Loyal Sibling Groups

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Hansels and Gretels:

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We all remember the story of Hansel and Gretel: two young children, a brother and sister are abandoned by their father who has become the pawn of their wicked stepmother. Deprived of parents, Hansel and Gretel are forced to rely completely on one another as they find their way in a hostile wood. They counter the witch who nearly does them in, but using cooperation and cunning they destroy her. Their relationship, made intense by parental abandonment and external threat, enables them to survive and to return to their father, who has now rid himself of the wicked wife.

For the past four years, Michael Kahn and I have been studying extensive videotaped interviews of three groups of intensely loyal and caring siblings who have much in common with Hansel and Gretel. These include:

-- 4 brothers in mid-life, aged 36-45, three of whom were married

-- 2 brothers, aged 20 and 22, attending the same university

-- a brother age 6 and his sister age 9 living together in a foster home.

In our discussions with these siblings we have begun to answer some of the following questions:

-- What is loyalty or solidarity among siblings -- how is it demonstrated?

-- How do brothers and sisters develop such intense attachments to one another?

-- What are the benefits and burdens of loyalty?

What is Loyalty and How is it Demonstrated?

In the three families we interviewed, their loyalty to one another was, to put it simply, fierce. There was a sense, subscribed to by all three groups that their relationships with each other would come before all others in importance. Their relationships seemed governed by a "law" which ordained that first and foremost -- "we will stick together." These were not temporary alliances, rather they were relationship agreements with a long history and which the siblings wanted to continue in the future. Like members of an exclusive club, they admitted outsiders warily. As one brother put it:

> If I ever got in any trouble, I wouldn't go to my wife -- I wouldn't go to a friend -- I wouldn't go to my boss -- I'd go to my brother.

All three families communicated a sense that the siblings would always be available, that common assumptions could be shared immediately and without explanation, that they could count on their siblings for honesty and understanding.

Sibling loyalties as demonstrated in our research families parallel what Hartrup (1975) has termed "the unique qualities of a friendship."

(1) Actively trying to be with each other and negative reactions to being separated.

The four middle-aged brothers saw each other frequently or spoke frequently on the phone. Even if a brother had not seen the others in recent months, telephone contact would be made by one other brother, and this information filtered to the other two. Two of the brothers who lived one hundred miles apart saw each other at least monthly. The uncle-status of one of these brothers was celebrated by the entire family. The fact that he had not married and was potentially isolated was compensated by his being fully adopted into his younger brother's family of four children and a wife.

In the same group one brother recalled: "I think the most awful memory I have of growing up was when A. was taken to the hospital with a hernia operation. This was the worst thing -- to think that my little brother was having all these terrible things done to him -- we had never been away from each other before."

The two college-age brothers not only attended the same university but spent most major holidays with each other. They shared a fantasy that, after each had married, they would buy a home together -- a homestead, where their wives and children would blend with them into a big, happy household.

(2) Cooperation, sympathy and mutual helpfulness is another aspect of sibling loyalty, and it involves a certain ability to sacrifice your immediate personal interests on behalf of your siblings.

For example, the nine year old girl, speaking about her hyperactive and unstable younger brother: "I go into his classroom, which is right down the hall from mine and I ask his teacher how he is doing, and if he is going to get a good report card. He did very well the last time, too!" This, from a nine year old girl.

(3) A special language, not usually shared by outsiders.

Each of the sibling groups had a special "code" which bound them together in a privately shared world, and served to warn outsiders (in this case, the interviewer) that understanding this language was a key to understanding the siblings' relationship.

For example: the four brothers repeatedly broke into raucous laughter after one member had made, what to the interviewer seemed a perfectly neutral comment. They sarcastically "apologized" to the interviewer for the "silly" behavior of their brother, as if to say -- "This is our sense of humor, you'll never understand it since you didn't grow up with us."

Another example: The little boy became nervous and overactive during the televised interview and, at one point it looked as if, without physical restraint, the lights might be knocked over. The interviewer helplessly commanded and cajoled him. His sister then squinted furiously at him. He abruptly stopped jumping and, after one more piercing look, stayed angelically in his chair for the rest of the interview.

(4) Defense of one another against outsiders.

Middle brother in the group of four: "If I knew they needed it, I'd give any one of these guys my last buck, despite my obligations to my wife and children -- and I mean it, I've got a lifetime to live and a lifetime to make it back." This same man recalled fondly how his brothers used to stand up for one another if anyone was picked upon in their ghetto neighborhood. The Three Musketeers' "one for all and all for one" could easily have served as their motto.

What Experiences and Events Make for Such Intense Loyalties?

These three families, though coming from different ethnic groups, different age groups, sexual compositions, family sizes and life-styles had strikingly similar experiences with parents. In each family

parents had been weak, absent, hostile, or had actually died. This put the sibling group in a position of crucial need for reorganization, guidance and self protection.

With other support systems relatively unavailable, and confronted with a hostile environment, they clung together as the only steady and constant people in one another's lives.

	Type of Parental Loss	Threat from Outside
Four brothers (midlife)	Mother died in boys' teenage and pubertal years. Father exhausted, occasionally abusive, emotionally unavailable.	Financial threat to family. Grew up in slum-ghetto conditions where physical threat was an everyday reality.
Two college brothers (early adulthood-late adolescence)	Parents died within two years of one another when boys were 9 and 11 and later 11 and 13.	Both boys seriously abused by a psycotic foster mother.
Brother and sister (middle childhood)	Father abandoned family after birth of 2nd child. Mother voluntarily placed children in foster care when children 4 and 2.	Several different foster homes; very little continuity of care. Foster care rather impersonal.

Like Hansel and Gretel, parental unavailability and being forced together to face overwhelming external threats seemed to force a powerful and intense personal sibling bond, in the families we studied.

The idea that parental unavailability fosters intense loyalties among the children is supported by the results of other studied conducted during the last 40 years.

In a study of sibling rivalry done in 1937, Levy found an inverse relationship between rivalry and size of family. The more children there are the less intense the relationship with parents can be. Sewall and Smalley's "Two Studies in Sibling Rivalry" (1930) illustrates the same point in a younger group of children, noting that "maternal oversolicitide"

seemed to be a major factor in preventing the formation of warm sibling relationships. In large families "oversolicitude" is sharply limited by factors of time and parent's exhaustion. Bossard and Boll (1956) interviewed adults who had grown up amidst many brothers and sisters. For the most part they acknowledged that there were warm and enduring bonds with brothers and sisters. Furthermore, they attributed these bonds in part to the difficulty of getting enough attention from parents: they were forced to cooperate with one another, knowing that they could not turn to parents to solve sibling conflicts.

Sophie Dann and Anna Freud (1954) studied a unique group of children whose parents had been murdered by the Nazis. They were reared together in the Ward for Motherless Children at the Terezin concentration camp. Four of these children had lost their mothers immediately after birth; the other two probably had lost their mothers before 12 months of age. ". . . After the loss of their mothers all the children wandered for some time from one place to another, with several complete changes of adult environment . . . . they were ignorant of the meaning of a 'family'." Once at the concentration camp nursery only their basic biological needs were met by adults. Their social activity apparently consisted entirely of play with one another. They never knew or attached themselves to adults. When the Allies finally liberated Terezin in 1945 the children were flown as a group to a therapeutic nursery where Freud and Dann studied them.

Striking was the total absence of rivalry and aggression amongst this sibling-like group. They trusted no adults.

> "The children's positive feelings were centered exclusively in their own group. It was evident that they cared greatly for each other and not at all for anybody or anything else . . . . They had no other wish than to be together and became upset when they were separated from each other even for short moments . . . This insistence on being

inseparable made it impossible in the beginning to treat the children as individuals or to vary their lives according to their special needs. (p.131)

Further: The children's unusual emotional dependence on each other was borne out further by the almost complete absence of jealousy, rivalry and competition . . . Since the adults played no part in their emotional lives at the time, they did not compete with each other for favors or recognition . . . They did not grudge each other their possessions . . . When one of them received a present from a shopkeeper, they demanded the same for each of the other children, even in their absence. . . . At mealtimes handing food to the neighbor was of greater importance than eating oneself. (p.134)

One child, however, displayed feelings of envy, jealousy and competitiveness and was spiteful and malicious in her actions towards the other children. Strikingly, she was the only child in the group to have had an emotional attachment to a mothering person while in the concentration camp nursery. She and the directress of the nursery had taken a liking to one another."

Other studies which suggest that intense sibling involvements are promoted by parents' unavailability have focused on twins. National attention was recently given to twins who developed "glossolalia" -- a private language which was understood only by one another and had to be decoded by researchers. These twins' parents were overburdened by outside responsibilities and spent little "quality time" with them. They were reared primarily by a non-English-speaking caretaker who gave them routine custodial service. Like the twins about whom Burlingham wrote in 1952, their involvement in each other's conscious and unconscious lives were more potent than involvement with parents.

Rabin's research (1965) in the Kubbitz focused on children who spent only two hours per day with their parents. Among children of the kibbutz there was little evidence of jealousy and hatred among siblings when compared to children of traditional nuclear families whose parents had been more available to them.

Sibling Loyalty: Benefits and Burdens

Each of the siblings in our study reported many advantages of such a close relationship. Knowing that one need never feel entirely alone was one such advantage. Learning skills from one another was another. An opportunity to practice being a parent, to give as well as to learn to reciprocate was also mentioned.

Yet there were distinct disadvantages to being a loyal sibling. The 9-year old girl seemed an old lady before her time, and while able to relate sensitively as an "adult", she seemed unaware of the world of play. At 9, burdened with the care of her little brother, she appeared well on her way to a life of over-seriousness and grim perfection. The younger of the two college brothers said that he frequently felt he was a "nobody", living only as an extension of his older brother's personality. Despite the warmth they felt for each other, he had to get away for a few years so he could find out who he, uniquely, was. And the group of four brothers restricted each other's personal freedom regarding other emotional relationships and loyalties to other people. For example, the brothers acted almost as a censorship board about marriages and women. Their strong sense of machismo and loyalty to each other made marriage a threat to their relationships with each other. Their collective view that women would have to enter their lives cautiously, always respecting the brothers' primary relationship to each other rattled one wife; another had to adapt by becoming -- "one of the boys." She never challenged their relationship, went along with their male humor, participated in sports with them. She knew that to gain entry into their world she had to adapt to her husband's appreciation of his brothers. They, in return, adopted her almost as a sister. For the other brother, his wife's failure to adapt to the culture

. . .

of brothers became a point of criticism and teasing. He had married a woman who "doesn't fit in with us."

Loyalty among siblings brings with it many benefits. But relationships this intense, forged in the hot fires of desperate need, can be encumbering and restrictive when the individual tries to develop personal loyalties outside the sibling group.

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